

# The demoscene; a forgotten art form?

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

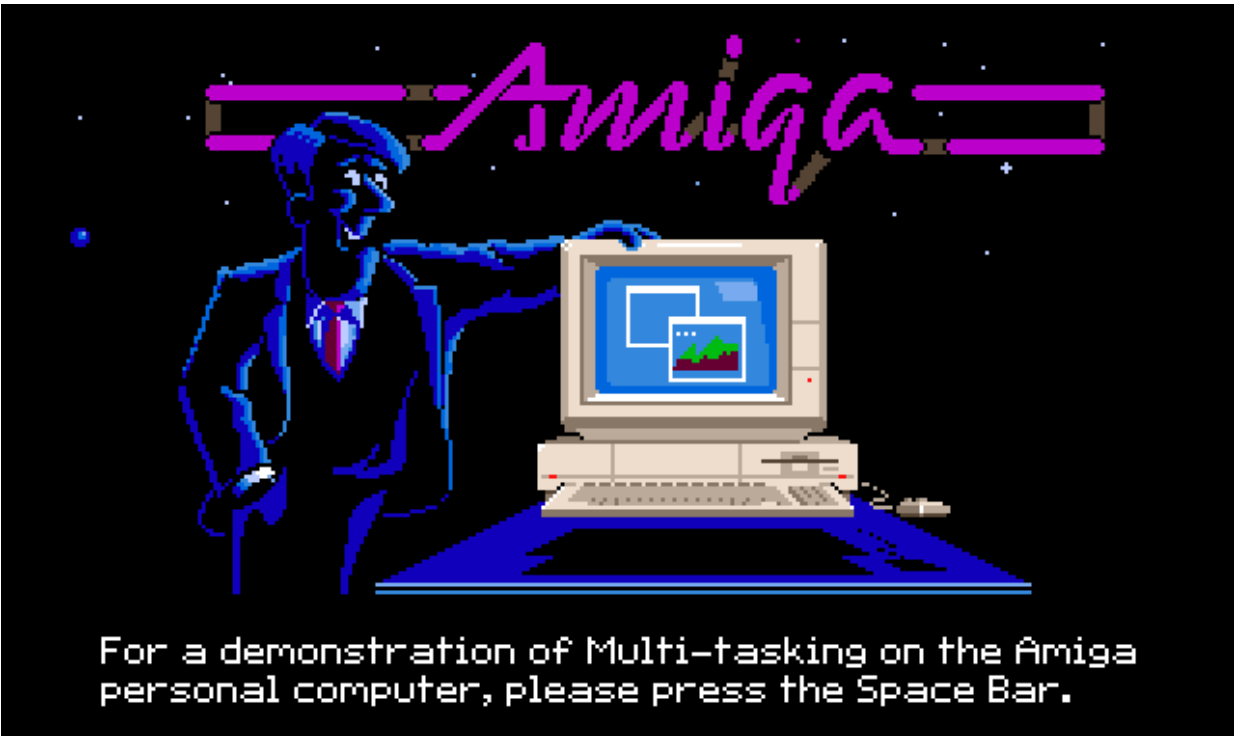
None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

-----

While it would be stretching the truth a tad to say that the demoscene is alive and kicking under the limelight of mainstream TV, it *does* still exist in a diluted form in limited, often overlooked net niches.



What am I babbling on about? There's a scene for try-before-you-buy game tasters now? While I'm sure they have their own dedicated set of fans, this isn't an article about crippled half-games. Demos are highly sophisticated, audio-visual treats served in the form of executable programs designed to demonstrate the technical capabilities of the computers employed to create and present them. They comprise graphical wizardry synchronised with often frenetic hip-hop or techno rhythms, overlaid with scrolling text messages, credits and acknowledgements to other affiliated demosceners.



Demos are non-interactive, programmed to execute in real time. Often inspired by themes of fantasy or science fiction, they contain little narrative content; incoherence is actually a welcome 'feature' of some of the most revered demos. The key ingredients are a combination of mathematical precision, solid programming skills and artistic flair.



Demos were originally coded in Assembly language, and later in C, C++ or Pascal, their roots tracing back to the early days of software cracking on the Commodore 64. Release groups such as Fairlight and Paradox would go to great lengths to reverse engineer the built-in copyright protection mechanisms of games, thus were keen to ensure anyone playing their cracked incarnations knew who was responsible for making them available to the masses. The solution they devised entailed tacking on graffiti-esque introductions, sneakily inserted into the game code to be executed whenever loaded.



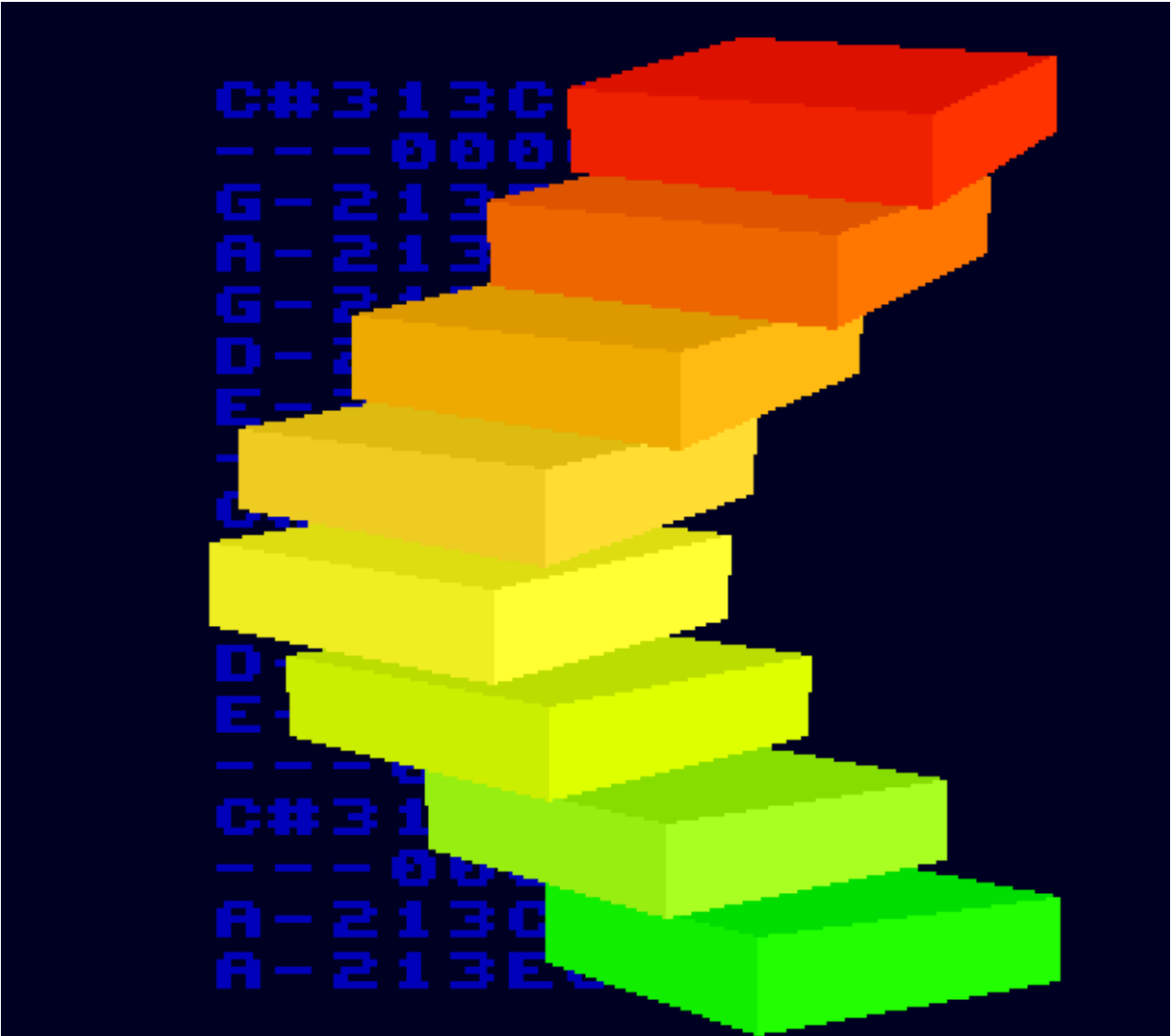
The earliest embodiments took the form of elementary displays of scrolling text accompanied by repetitive melodies, though these rapidly evolved along with the hardware on which they were coded. Special effects such as parallax scrolling, simulated fire and morphing plasma were soon incorporated. In no time at all, anti-aliased 3D models were conceived and animated, enhanced with complex shading techniques, boasting ultra-realistic topography. Some are so mind-bendingly bizarre it's entirely feasible to fabricate the experience of flying high on class A drugs, minus the deadly risk of seizures, epileptic fits or delayed schizophrenia. Always a bonus.



You can sample a superfluity of classic Amiga demos over on YouTube, eschewing the necessity to run and configure an Amiga emulator such as WinUAE or FS-UAE. If you'd rather experience them first-hand, so to speak, you might like to familiarise yourself with my emulation tutorial and then scour Google for the relevant ADF files. Demos are, and always *were*, free to download, so you will have no difficulties finding an abundance of them online.



Onlookers couldn't fail to be blown away by such stunning exhibits of electronic artistry as nothing of its ilk had ever been witnessed before. Interest in demos escalated, so much so that some crackers chose to leave behind their shady past to focus attention exclusively on coding intros as front-ends for other people's releases.



In their infancy, demos were coded as one-person projects, nonetheless, as they became more ambitious, the production process had to be stratified. Graphic artists took care of the visual aspects, musicians wrote and composed the background soundtracks, whilst programmers were responsible for combining the latter elements to bring demos to life. Long before the demoscene reached the pinnacle of its popularity in the mid-nineties, it broke away from its cracking heritage to become an entity in its own right.

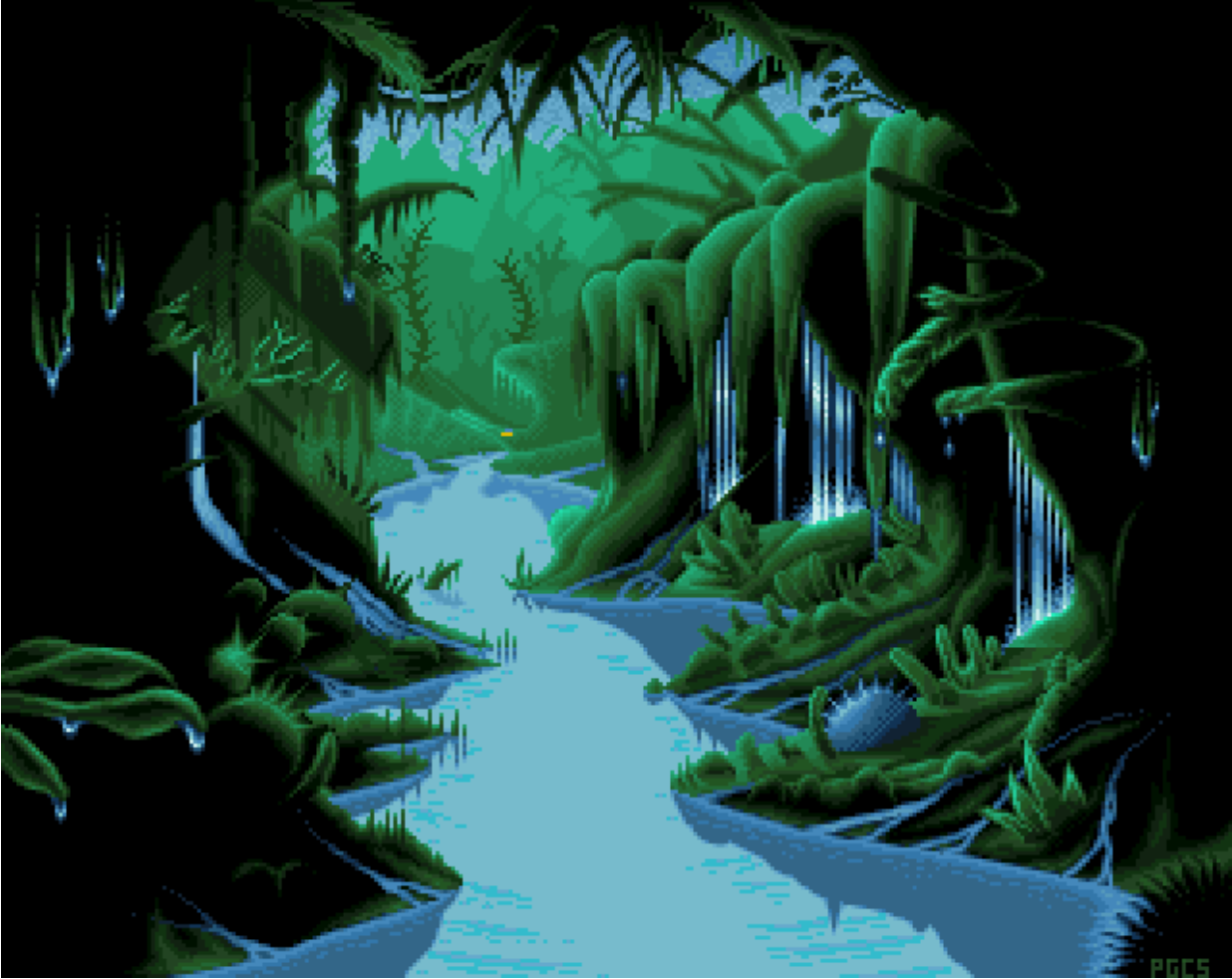




Before then, demos received little mainstream coverage due to their associations with underground cyber culture. Unsurprisingly enough, popular computer magazines were reluctant to draw attention to the 'warez' scene because their respective interests served cross-purposes. Although the demoscene eventually became independent of cracking, it hasn't yet managed to shake off the negative connotations forged by such an early partnership. This, we can postulate, is partially because many of the people involved have a foot in each camp. Consequently, the demoscene has remained a computing subculture with a limited audience. That said, a small number of publications such as *Amiga Power* *did* in due course devote a monthly page or two to reviewing and promoting the most popular offerings from the demoscene.



Meanwhile, members of the demoscene didn't twiddle their thumbs waiting for fame and glory to be handed to them on a plate by the popular press; they formed music groups, wrote electronic magazines, coded 'diskmags' and distributed their work through PD (public domain) software libraries. Regular demo charts and competitions were the impetus for orchestrating imaginative and original, cutting-edge eye candy. demosceners were driven by nothing more than the desire to express their artistic talents, earning the adoration of fellow sceners in the process.



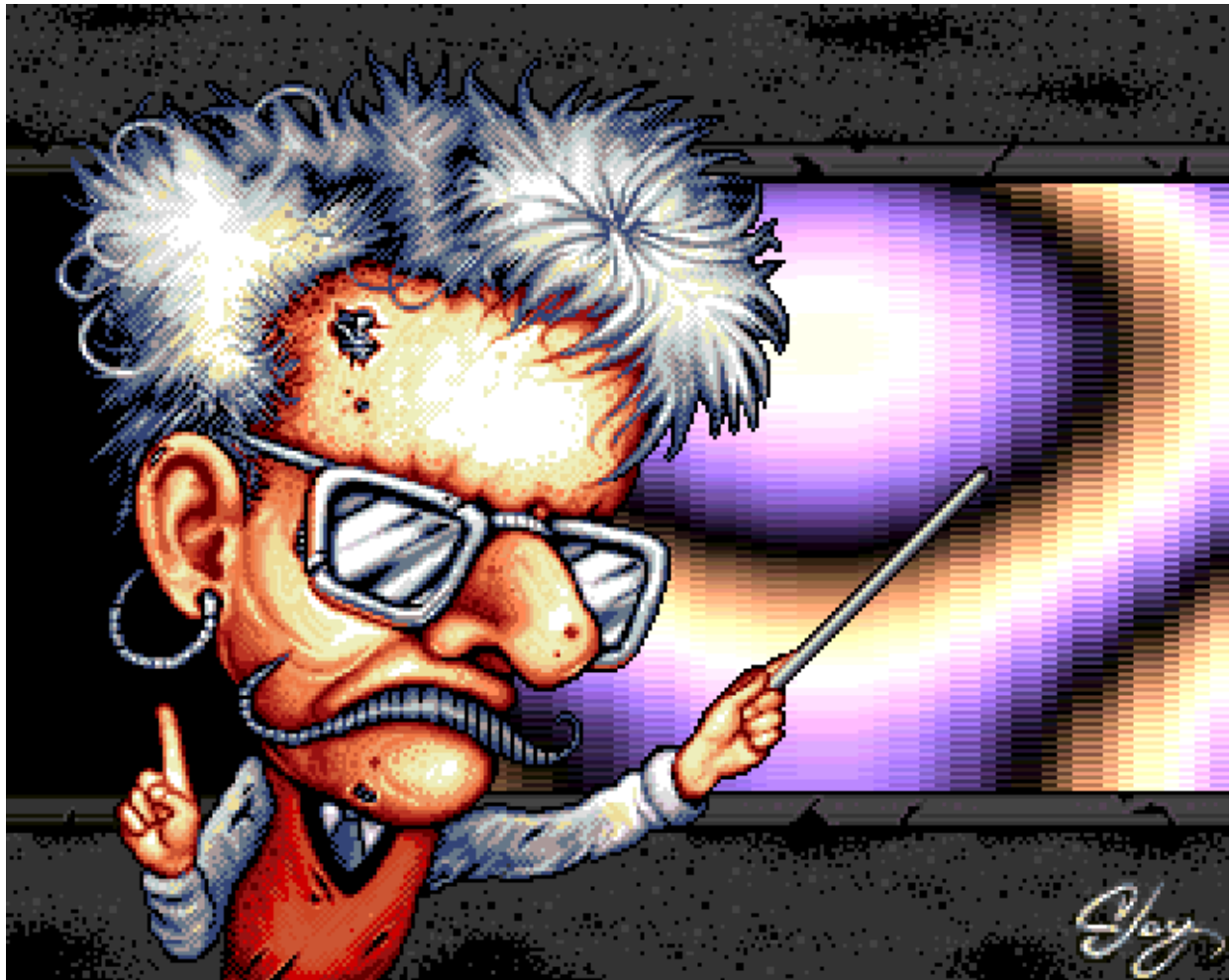
As the scene developed, formal rules for submitting entries to demo competitions arose, while various divisions were established. Intros could be no larger than 64kb, whereas 'megademos' would occupy anywhere up to 1mb of data. Other contests stipulated more extreme limits, yet 'wild' challenges allowed sceners to code 'free-style', liberated from the constraints of conventional boundaries. This transgression of such boundaries epitomised the demoscene, with programmers seemingly able to make the impossible *possible*. Accordingly, the demos produced were far more advanced than any in-game sequences of the time since they were designed to make use of 100% of a given computer's CPU and peripheral resources. Juxtapose this with the constrictions faced by games developers who would have to

conserve processing power for other essential functions demanded by interactive software.



Remote trading, BBS and later internet interaction lacked the human touch, the yearning for which gave rise to the 'demo party', amongst the most well-attended, The Party, Assembly, The Gathering and Mekka and Symposium. These get-togethers took place in gigantic auditoriums, populated by as many as 5000 sceners at a time. The focus was analogous to that of the *virtual* demoscene; people would bring their computers along to work on entries and these would be submitted for judgement. Demos were presented on a huge projection screen while mesmerised spectators voted for the

most technically adept, aesthetically pleasing, aurally creative and so on.



Generally, parties took place over the course of several days, visitors bringing along their sleeping bags or even tents to camp out on the floor, capitalising upon every last second of the events. Not that sleeping was ever a top priority mind you. People would booze, eat pizza and write code into the wee small hours of the morning, kept awake only by endless caffeine boosts.



The demoscene was strictly a European phenomenon, the domain almost exclusively of male under 30s. To encourage more visitors of the fairer sex, party organisers were known to waive the entrance fee for females, though the impact was hardly staggering; most attendees were girlfriends of competition entrants rather than independent challengers or even curious bystanders.





Sadly, in modern times, demo parties suffer from dwindling attendance figures, some even cancelled through lack of interest and/or quality of the entries. While sceners, at one time, entered competitions for the mere thrill of having their work scrutinised by peers, accruing notoriety amongst the fold, today, many have to be bribed into coding through the lure of cash prizes, leading to disenchanted cries of "sell-out" from those who hold the glory days close to their hearts. Those that still exist are often blended with LAN gaming parties, much to the exasperation of oldskool sceners who do not appreciate having their hobby trounced by screaming kiddies shouting obscenities at one another whilst playing network favourites such as Call of Duty.



Correspondingly, many demo parties have been infiltrated by people who only want to swap pirated software or watch porn. Recently, party organisers have hit back at this trend by imposing more stringent conduct regulations, though it may well be too late to turn back the tide. Financing such events seems to be the principal impediment; hiring venues of this magnitude requires sums of money that are simply out of reach of independent organisers. Getting demo parties off the ground necessitates the investment of corporate sponsors. Sponsors who will only consider entangling themselves assuming there is sufficient interest in the event. Network and internet gaming is popular, the demoscene far less so.



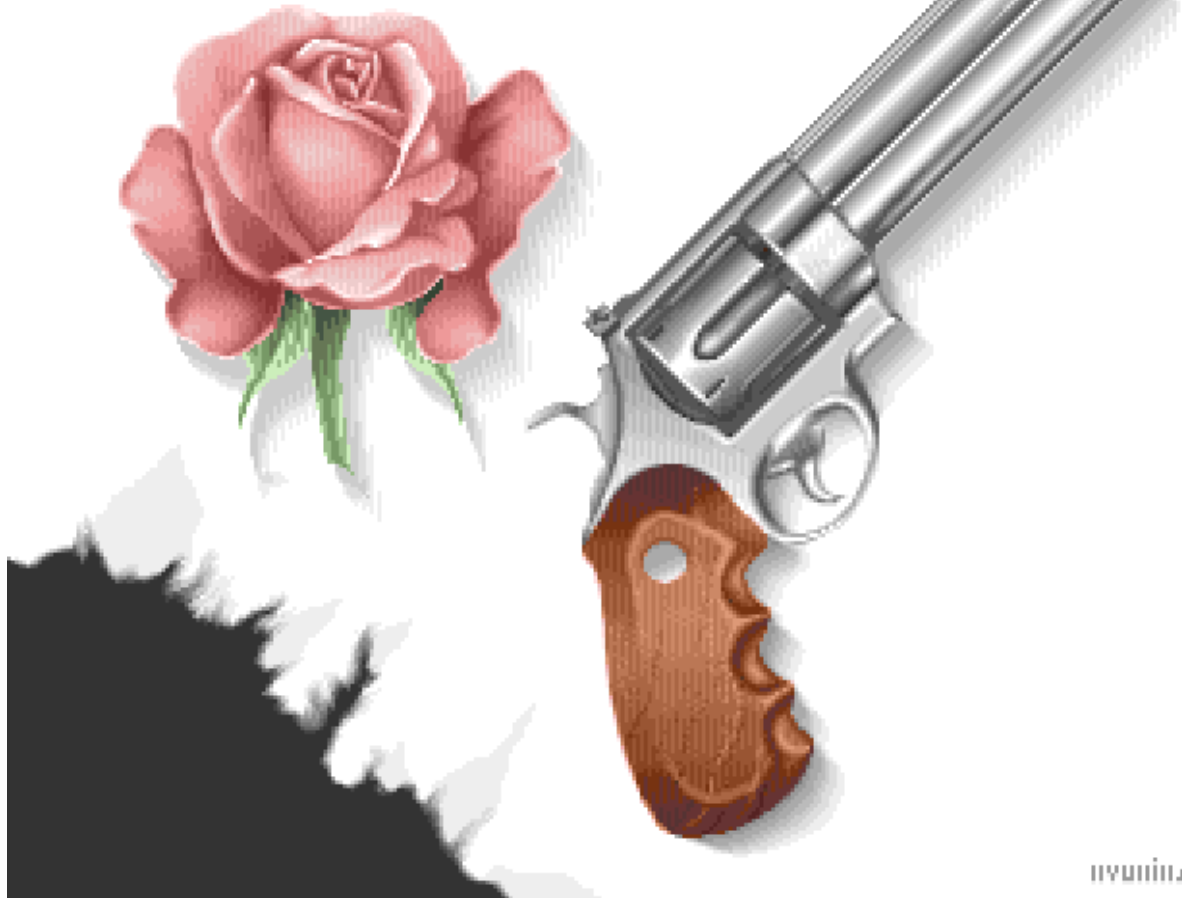


It's not all bad news, however; some of the most comprehensive demo web sites - including Pouet, Demozoo and Exotica - are still going strong. Both support a steady flow of new submissions and forum activity is brisk. While coaxing retro demos to execute on a modern PC can be tricky, running those designed specifically for today's operating systems is child's play - it's simply a matter of double-clicking an executable file, in fact! If you've never had the pleasure of witnessing a well-crafted demo coded by one of the major players, do yourself a favour by setting the record straight immediately. You won't be disappointed.



Those who have left the demoscene are often headhunted by games developers in need of inventive computer professionals. What may have begun as 'art for art's sake' has taken those involved far beyond their primary, modest goals. Countless techniques applied in demo-making are directly transferable to other aspects of software development. You might be surprised by the number of people involved in producing today's blockbusting PC games that were enticed into programming by the demoscene. Many still code demos in their spare time, and those who don't, have used their talents as a springboard to other ventures.

# The End



ivvini2